

## Not in Kansas Anymore

Editorial

June 19, 2003

"IT NEVER CEASES to amaze me that people are so cynical they want to tie money to issues, money to bills, money to amendments," the House majority leader, Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Tex.), said the other day. Would this be the same Mr. DeLay who is renowned for keeping a ledger in his office tracking "friendly" and "unfriendly" political action committees -- as measured by their contributions to the GOP? The same Mr. DeLay who was chastised by the House ethics committee for threatening a Washington trade association with retaliation after it hired a Democrat?

One way to tamp down the cynicism that upsets him would be for Mr. DeLay to call on the Justice Department to investigate the matter that prompted his lament. It involves a Kansas-based firm, Westar Energy Inc., whose executives somehow got the notion that it would cost them \$56,500 to "get a seat at the table" to have a provision they were seeking inserted into the energy bill. When one executive noted, "DeLay is from TX. What is our connection?" another Westar official set him straight: The majority leader's "agreement is necessary before the House Conferees can push the language we have in place in the House bill." That month the company gave \$25,000 in "soft money" to a committee that has close connections to Mr. DeLay.

Mr. DeLay and the other lawmakers involved sputter at any suggestion of a quid pro quo between Westar contributions and their support for the Westar amendment. But the company's documents suggest that it saw a connection quite clearly. This was no general, good-corporate-citizen request for political involvement, but rather an urgent call for checks -- "return these checks and we'll deliver them tomorrow," one memo said. Another document outlines the company's "total estimated needs" -- that is, the amount of campaign donations required -- for "federal energy legislation and our effort to include grandfather clause."

Perhaps these cynical Kansans misconstrued the way Washington works. There's a rather simple way to resolve this. The Justice Department, which already is investigating unrelated fraud at Westar, could question the executives to see where they got the idea that they could get what they wanted if they produced enough campaign checks. It could interview the lawmakers and their staffs and obtain the relevant correspondence, phone logs and e-mails. Attorney General John D. Ashcroft ought to get such a probe going -- and then he should consider promptly recusing himself from the matter, not so much because he received some contributions from Westar executives as because of the political stakes involved.